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ATTITUDES TOWARD ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMS IN THE EXTENSION SERVICE, A CASE STUDY.

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IN THE CURRENT WAR ON POVERTY, THE POSITION OF THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, WHICH HISTORICALLY HAS SERVED THE MIDDLE-CLASS FARMER, IS NOT WELL DEFINED. TO IDENTIFY FACTORS WHICH INHIBIT THE ADOPTION OF EXTENSION PROGRAMS FOR THE POOR, A STUDY WAS MADE OF THE SERVICE IN MIFFLIN COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, AN APPALACHIAN AREA HAVING A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF LOW INCOME FAMILIES (UNDER $3,000 PER YEAR) THAN THE STATE AS A WHOLE. THIS PAPER EXAMINES ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY, PRESENTS A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF EXTENSION, AND REPORTS ON STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD ANTI-POVERTY WORK. DATA WERE COLLECTED THROUGH 62 PERSONAL INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF, LOCAL LEADERS, ADMINISTRATORS OF WELFARE AGENCIES, AND RURAL AND URBAN LOW INCOME FAMILIES. A MAJORITY OF THE RESPONDENTS STATED THAT WORK WITH THE POOR WAS LEGITIMATE ONLY IF THEY SHOWED INTEREST IN IMPROVING THEIR CONDITION BY PARTICIPATING IN EXTENSION PROGRAMS. OTHERS MAINTAINED THAT EXTENSION WAS NOT MEETING ITS RESPONSIBILITY TO ALL PEOPLE AND ADVOCATED CHANGES. IT APPEARED, HOWEVER, THAT EXTENSION WOULD CONTINUE TRADITIONAL PROGRAMS WITH INDIVIDUAL STAFF MEMBERS PROVIDING SPECIFIC ANTI-POVERTY EFFORTS, AT LEAST IN THE COUNTY STUDIED. (AJ)

Division of Extension Research and Training
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ATTITUDES TOWARD ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMS IN THE EXTENSION SERVICE: A CASE STUDY *

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Introduction

In the current war on poverty, the position of the Cooperative Extension Service in this effort is not well defined. There has been a certain amount of reluctance on the part of Federal agencies concerned with this war to employ the Cooperative Extension Service in its traditional educational role. Within Extension, there has been an ambivalent attitude toward the specific war on poverty. Many people in Extension feel the organization has been working with poor people for many years. Others feel Extension in the past has reached mainly middle-class and upper middle-class segments of the population, to the virtual exclusion of the lower socioeconomic categories.

Much of the organizational machinery set up by the Federal Government, such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, etc., has been consciously designed to by-pass established bureaucracies - both State and Federal. The idea is to be able to operate in a more flexible manner, to be able to create more imaginative and innovative programs in dealing with the problem of poverty.

Many people, both in and out of Extension, feel that the Extension Service as an educational institution has a great deal to contribute to the reduction of poverty and deprivation among people. The Extension Service has an organizational structure with many years of experience in administering informal educational programs based on the needs of the people. It also has had experience in organizing communities for self-help improvement programs. This experience and this knowledge of local communities could be used in planning and implementing anti-poverty programs. In fact, the Extension Service claims to have been combating poverty for a long time by helping the farmer become more efficient, enlarging his horizon, and building the character of farm use, and by teaching the homemaker how to create a better home for the farm family.

But the Extension Service hardly ever has made a conscious effort to reach the culturally deprived segment of society. Its programs are intended to reach "all the people of the United States" without regard to socioeconomic status, race, or religion. It might be expected that the number of people reached in all these levels should be proportionately equal. However, the Extension Service historically has served primarily the middle-class farmer. People who value education and who have aspirations of upward movility have been the most receptive to Extension's programs. The Extension Service has had difficulty in reaching both the highest and the lowest socioeconomic groups, possibly because its major target has been the middle group.

This paper reports on a case study of the Cooperative Extension Service and its relationship to anti-poverty work in a Pennsylvania county. This study is part of a larger one on resource develop[illegible] financed by the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Experiment Station.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to identify factors which facilitate or inhibit the adoption of Extension Service programs for low-income people.

There are a number of variables which affect the adoption of new practices by organizations as well as by individuals. In this case we have grouped these variables into two categories. One is structural, inherent in the understanding, expectations, and relationships established over the years among the Extension Service, its clientele, its supporting groups, and the larger society. The first part of this paper consists of a structural analysis of the Extension Service.

The second part of the paper reports on the attitudinal variable. The objectives in this part of the study are to : (1) Discover the degree to which anti-poverty work is considered a legitimate concern of Extension by its staff and cooperating groups, and (2) ascertain attitudes toward poverty and opinions about possible remedies held by these persons.

Procedure of the Study

The unit of analysis is the county extension staff because of its importance in determining the programs of the Cooperative Extension Service. Mifflin County, Pennsylvania was selected as the research site because it met the following criteria: (1) It has, as far as possible, a typical extension program with a typical staff makeup; (2) it has a higher percentage of low-income people than the State as a whole; (3) it is within the Federally designated Appalachian region; (4) it has an extension staff which was willing to cooperate in this project; and (5) it is within 30 miles of The Pennsylvania State University.

Mifflin County has a population of 44,000. The rural population amounts to 65 percent; 41 percent are classified as rural farm. At the time of the beginning of this study, the unemployment rate in Mifflin County was over 5 percent; for the State as a whole at that time, it was 4.2 percent. The percentage of low-income families (with a yearly net income of less than $3,000) was 24 percent as compared with 16.8 percent for the State of Pennsylvania. The county seat has a population of approximately 12,000. The county office has the usual professional staff - a county agricultural agent, an assistant agricultural agent, a home economist, and clerical personnel.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize very far on the basis of findings from one case. But, as is usual in the case study method, it was hoped, since the county extension situation in this county is fairly typical and the local staff could be expected to have some of the basic attitudes of other extension workers, that some insights into the general problem could be gained.

The data for this study were collected by means of personal, semi-structured interviews. The first set of questions was concerned with general perceptions of Extension's goals, role, subject matter, scope, procedures, and clientele. The second part of the interview was designed to elicit expressions of attitudes toward poverty, its causes, and possible remedies, and the specific role of the Extension Service in anti-poverty programs. Sixty-two interviews were conducted. Those interviewed were:

1. Extension staff members from local, area, and State levels (14).
2. Members of the county executive committee and advisory group (28).
3. Volunteer local leaders (11, 7 of whom also were members of the county executive committee).

4. Local government officials (3).

5. Administrators of local welfare agencies (3).

6. Both rural and urban low-income families (10).

Structural Analysis of the Extension Service

Probably the most outstanding characteristic of the Extension Service is its cooperative makeup. Because of this organizational characteristic, it is financed by public funds coming from Federal, State, and county levels. These funds are appropriated to the Extension Service on the different levels for the development of certain types of activities leading to some approved objective or end. Therefore, in Extension's program development process the different ideas and opinions about Extension's goals and role held by influential people on the various levels have to be considered in order to secure continuation of their financial support.

The typical bureaucratic structure found on the Federal level of Extension tends to disappear gradually from State to county levels as channels of authority and control become looser and the procedures become more democratic. The Federal and State Extension Services do not have any direct control over determination of local programs, but indirectly they set broad frameworks for them by means of teaching materials and orientations for organization and administration of programs they provide for the local staff.

It is on the county level that Extension's programs ultimately are determined. Very important in this process are local supporting groups and county extension personnel. The local staff occupies a unique position for reconciling expectations from within the organization with local interests and needs to form the framework of what they do ultimately. This process of program determination is not a passive one on the part of the local staff members but is influenced to a great extent by their professional backgrounds, extension training, past experience, and personal skills and privileges. Therefore, the introduction of a new activity into the extension program, such as specific work with low-income groups, depends to a large extent upon the evaluation of this activity by county staff members themselves. It also depends a great deal on the attitudes and perceptions relating to this activity held by local support groups.

Cultural-Institutional Analysis

The cultural aspects of any organization are based mainly on the values of that organization. Organizational values are the central unifying forces of any social system. The discovery of the basic value system of an organization is a necessary step toward understanding it.

Values may be defined as standards or codes, persistent through time, which organize a system of action; or, in Parsons' terminology, "... an element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard of selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically in a situation."*

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*Parsons, Talcott, "Sociological Approach to the Study of Organizations" (Adm. Science Qualterly, June, 1956), pp. 63-64.

The Extension Service is an educational organization which differs from a formal educational system by its informality, flexibility, and variability. The Extension Service puts empahsis on practical demonstrations and training through action. Participation in programs of the Extension Service is not compulsory but voluntary. In spite of having been established originally for the farm population, Extension programs are aimed today to reach a variety of people. Extension programs do not follow pre-established curricula; they are determined and conducted with the cooperation of local people. These local people decide with their support and participation or withdrawal whether or not a program will be carried out.

Education for its own sake is not a widely valued end in this pragmatic society. It is regarded rather as a means for the attainment of social and economic improvement. Education in the United States has two major goals: (1) To contribute to the economic growth and well-being of this country, and (2) to support and perpetuate its democratic system. Extension, being an educational organization and part of the State land-grant institutions, shares these goals with other educational institutions, but differs in the procedures utilized for their attainment.

Extension has been based historically on two major premises which were present at the creation of the Extension Service and have been at the base of its dominant values. One was the recognition of a farm problem and the feeling that improvement could be attained through appropriate action. This is linked intimately with the value of progress, implying the acceptance of change and the conception of change as desirable, the new being better than the old. Examples of this orientation are found in the early statements of the founders of the Extension Service.

The second premise is that the individual has a certain amount of control over his environment; that he has or can develop the ability and judgment to appraise a situation, determine what needs to be changed, and determine means by which needed changes can be accomplished. Individuals and groups can be guided in recognizing problems that call for action, but people have to be given the freedom to decide whether or not the change will take place.

This second premise includes a complex value cluster which is related to the value of progress and makes up the real core of the dominent value orientation of Extension. The central value here is individualism. Individualism maintains that the best state of affairs is brought about by self-determining individuals without outside coercion or pressures. It conceives of the individual as an end in himself, not a means for the achievement of further ends. It presupposes inherent individual integrity and moral responsibility and faith in common people. Coupled to this is the humanistic conception of human perfectibility; all men have the ability to learn and improve themselves. Included in this value cluster is democracy. Democracy shares the high evaluation of the individual's intrinsic worth, belief in majority rule, the feeling that group discussion consensus is the best means of problem solving, and an insistence on social rights for all members of a group on an equal basis.

Another influential factor in the development of the value system of the Extension Service has been the pragmatic orientation of this nation, putting science to practical use and trying to establish a scientific basis for practical enterprises, such as agriculture. This orientation

was influential in the creation of the agricultural colleges and experiment stations and also contributed to the creation and character of the Extension Service, designed for the dissemination of scientific information.

Thus, the values of individualism, democracy, pragmatism, and progress, closely interrelated with each other, form the core of the value system of the Extension Service. These are the fundamental value premises around which the Extension Service was organized and developed. The democratic elements of equal opportunity and rights for all people, together with the pragmatic orientation, account for the unique characteristics of the Extension Service and set it apart from the formal education system from which it stemmed.

These values also are shared by the total American society. Consequently, they legitimize the general goal of Extension of attaining a better democratic society with more equal social and economic opportunities and well being for a larger number of people.

These values operate in the determination of organizational processes. They influence the recruitment process, the socialization of new members, the determination of educational programs, and relationships with supporting groups. The internalization of these values on the part of Extension employees influences the manner in which they interpret their organizational roles, and also influences their attitudes toward problems they consider to be legitimate for Extension to deal with.

Poverty Defined

As you know, poverty is hard to define precisely. Our respondents also had difficulty with this concept. It is important to review their varying definitions of poverty, however, because the ways in which they understand poverty and its causes have a great deal to do with their judgments about what sorts of programs are needed to combat it.

In the interview schedule, the term "low income" was used, but many respondents indicated that an income figure alone does not provide reliable criterion. Some were especially dissatisfied with the standard of a yearly net family income of less than $3,000 as a major indicator of poverty. One of the respondents said, "According to this definition, I am also in poverty. I would never have known if I had not been told."

Of course, defining poverty is difficult, since it involves socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological aspects. Furthermore, poverty is relative; many people, who are classified in the poverty category today, enjoy many more creature comforts than did the poverty stricken of half a century ago. But, a realistic conceptualization of poverty is important because this concept is decisive in formulating programs and setting up strategies to combat poverty. The character of these programs and how they are operated will depend in large measure on the conceptions of poverty and its causes.

None of the definitions of poverty are completely satisfactory by themselves. One is the <u>economic</u> approach, in which income or occupation are used as indicators. The annual family net income of less than $3,000 has the advantage of being relatively easily ascertainable. It has the disadvantage of neglecting non-monetary variables which sometimes

are important in the individual's self-conception. Another definition is cultural, in which the style of life is assessed. But, the use of this definition invariably involves value judgments. In any case, it is not well understood nor agreed upon what constitutes style of life. Another definition might be called the negative risk approach, in which individuals or families are considered in a condition of poverty when they have a number of risk characteristics, such as race, occupation, age, disability, undereducation, etc., which make it difficult for them to take part in the labor force.

Perceptions and Attitudes of Respondents

It is not possible in a short report to give the detailed findings from the study, so they are presented in a summary fashion. The responses were classified into three major categories with regard to their attitudes toward the introduction of programs in Extension directed toward the poor: (1) Change opposing, (2) neutral, and (3) change favoring. Table 1 shows what proportion of each group interview fell into each of these three categories.

The change opposing group felt that present extension programs and methods are satisfactory and should be continued as at present. They interpreted the role of the Extension Service as educational, advisory, and supervisory, and directed to all people, but especially farmers. They saw the over-all goal as that of helping people improve their living through the application of modern technology to problems of the farm, business, and home. They thought of extension methods as ways of informing people, generally by means of mass media, about the availability of various programs of Extension and letting them choose those in which they want to participate.

They would condone involvement of the Extension Service with anti-poverty programs only to the extent to which it would not interfere with already existing programs. To them, specific work with the poor is a legitimate activity for the Extension Service if wanted by the poor and if positive results can be attained. They see the rural poor as more of a responsibility of the Extension Service than the urban poor.

They defined poverty not so much by the net amount of income of the family as by a distinctive pattern of behavior different from the middle class way of life. They cited as causes of poverty lack of initiative, reluctance to change and improve, and aversion to hard work on the part of the poor, as well as indifference to programs designed to help them. This group placed the major responsibility for overcoming poverty on the poor people themselves.

This group felt that extension programs were open to all interested people, including the poor, and were flexible enough to meet the needs of various types of clientele. They saw them as suitable, with only minor changes, to fit the requirements of a program for the low-income group. They also saw the traditional procedures as adequate to aid all socioeconomic groups, and not to be altered to fit a special group because of the principles of equality and democracy. In other words, the responsibility of the Extension Service toward the poor is the same as it is to all other groups in the society.

Table 1

Orientation Differences Within Groups *

	Change favoring		Neutral		Change opposing		Totals
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Extension State staff	2	22	2	22	5	56	9
Extension county staff	1	20	1	20	3	60	5
County extension executive committee and leaders	8	25	7	21	17	54	32
County government officials	0		0		3	100	3
County agency managers	3	100	0		0		3
Totals	14	26.5	10	19	28	54.5	52

* The low-income people were not included in this table because they were not represented within the organized, decision-making county extension system. All the low-income respondents who had some familiarity with extension programs (6 respondents) favored change; the remaining four did not know about Extension and had no opinions on this matter.

This group considered the Extension Service as uniquely endowed to carry out a program for the low-income group, since it has the necessary organizational structure, experience, and "know-how" to develop one. The main obstacle this group could see to successful development of a poverty program was the limitation on staff members and financial resources in relation to the magnitude of the task. If the Extension Service were able to obtain additional funds which would permit expansion of the present program, the low-income people could be helped successfully.

Those in the neutral group constitute a residual category of those who are indifferent to the idea of Extension taking on work related to the poor, or those who did not know enough about Extension or the poor to offer any opinions on this subject.

The change favoring group had different attitudes in relation to poverty and its causes. Whereas the change opposing group tended to blame poverty on characteristics of the poor themselves, the change favoring group tended to blame the circumstances in which the poor found themselves for their condition of poverty and for the personal characteristics that resulted from this condition. This group felt that the poor are unable to overcome these circumstances without outside help, which places the responsibility for alleviating these conditions with the higher socioeconomic groups in the society rather than with the poor themselves.

This group saw programs for the poor as necessary to help the poor change these circumstances by deliberate efforts to lead their activities from simple to more complex projects in order to change their attitudes of impotence and defeatism. The program would have to be especially planned for the poor, taking into consideration their situations, values, and frames of reference. It should place great emphasis on practical and useful projects, those which do not involve substantial initial investments, which would stress better utilization of resources and encourage fuller participation in community life. This group interpreted current extension programs to be based on middle class values, which made them unappealing or irrelevant to the poor. They recommended personal contacts, individual guidance, and close supervision of work for this kind of program, especially during the initial stages.

This group felt that present extension programs and procedures are not diversified enough to appeal to clients from all social strata. However, it would be quite within Extension's democratic tradition to adapt parts of these programs to the real needs of the poor. This group felt it appropriate to depart from traditional and routine extension procedures when necessary. One respondent summed it up thusly: "If the Extension Service is really concerned with inequalities and wants to help provide an equal opportunity for all people, it has a direct responsibility to work with the poor. These are the people who really need help and the Extension Service should make a real effort to reach them with a program which would be relevant to their needs."

The main obstacle this group perceived in successful development of such a program is the undecided attitude of State and local extension staffs regarding this kind of work. The changes advocated by this group included having the State and local staffs take a definite position on work with the low-income group, acknowledge their responsibilities in this area, and decide on the amount of time and resources to be devoted

to this work. Its idea of an appropriate program for the low-income group was one that paralleled the regular extension program but whose content and procedures would be planned with the special characteristics and needs of the poor in mind. It would have to contain more basic information and practical projects and procedures in order to help them develop.

That programs of this type could indeed be carried out by Extension has been demonstrated by some individual efforts in this direction by staff members. In the county studied, the home demonstration agent had conducted a class in babysitting procedures which was attended by twelve young girls from poor families. These girls found the training program helpful and they were able to gain employment as a result of their training. The same home demonstration agent also had conducted a class in the utilization of surplus foods for those families who were on welfare and were receiving such food. This class also was well received, and she is planning to conduct another such class in the near future.

Summary and Conclusions

In the county studied, if the official baseline of a yearly net income of less than $3,000 per family is used as a measure of poverty, then a considerable part of Extension's regular clientele would fall into this category and a large part of Extension's present program could be seen as helpful to the poor. Most of these poor, however, do not consider themselves as poor and are not seen as such by the rest of their communities. In spite of having below national average economic resources, these people do participate in community life and affairs and share the main values, norms, and attitudes of the middle class. Extension workers refer to them as "interested and progressive" and work with this group is reported as work with low-income people. Extension's claim that it always has worked and now is working with low-income people is true, if this solely economic indicator of poverty is employed.

If, on the other hand, a standard of "real deprivation" (as one respondent expressed it) is employed, another type of poverty is identified. These people, in addition to not having adequate economic resources, have a constellation of characteristics which set them apart from the rest of the community. They do not participate in community life, they seem to lack drive and persistence in activities designed to help them, they allocate their resources and efforts in a way that the rest of the community does not find proper, and they are uninterested in extension programs. Some extension workers refer to these as uninterested and lazy, the "hard core" poor who have settled into this way of life. For this group, only specially planned and conducted extension programs are directly relevant, such as a clothing remodeling workshop, the babysitting training, and the class on use of surplus food. In these programs, the special characteristics of this group of poor people were considered. If this second definition of poverty is accepted, then only a small part of the extension program in this county had direct relevance for the poor.

The foregoing discussion shows that there is mixed opinion within Extension and among its supporting groups in relation to Extension's participation in poverty programs. Many respondents agreed that work with low-income people is a legitimate activity for the Extension Service. A majority, however, stated that it is legitimate only if the poor show interest in improving their condition by participating in extension programs and if positive results can be expected. These attitudes reflect basic

values of equalitarianism and pragmatism. If the poor fail to respond to extension programs, they may be dismissed as being uninterested, reluctant to change, and beyond help. Others maintain that Extension has a responsibility to all the people, but currently is not meeting the needs of the poor. Therefore, they advocate change in extension procedures and programs to make them more attractive and useful to people in the lower socioeconomic class.

Most established bureaucracies change slowly. Change, when it occurs, is consistent with the deeply held values of the organization as interpreted by its articulate members and adherents. The adjustments in the Extension Service suggested by the change favoring group would have to be accomplished by firm action on the part of extension personnel and an intensive educational program directed toward support groups. In the absence of such action, it appears probable that Extension will continue its traditional programs and procedures, with occasional specific poverty ameliorating efforts on the part of individual extension staff members, at least in the county studied.

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